



FOOD &amp; DRINKS • FOOD CULTURE

# On the Cider Trail in Spain's Basque Country

by Benjamin Kemper February 16, 2018



Courtesy Zelaia

Zelaia processes about 13 tons of apples a day.

## It's not all *pintxo* bars and Michelin stars in Basque Country.

It's January in the village of Hernani, Spain, and everyone is ringing in the start of cider season with a communal feast of salt-cod omelettes and fire-roasted ribeyes at [Zelaia](#), a local cider house. From time to time, a resounding “*Txotxi!*” rings out above the Basque babble: The cider master is about to uncork a *kupela*, or barrel. Forks clank down, sleeves roll up, and diners file into the abutting bodega to fill their glasses with cool, foamy *sagardo* straight from the 5,000-gallon tun. Among the crowd are Juan Mari Arzak and Martín Berasategui, world-renowned Basque chefs who I'm told are regular customers. But what is it about this humble cider house—with its chair-free dining room and four-item food menu—that attracts even the culinary elite?

Tradition is a major factor. Cider has been flowing in Basque Country—and in the neighboring regions of Asturias and Navarra—for at least 800 years, and is as integral to Basque folklore as its mountain-top *baserriak* (ancient stone housebarns), roving flocks of *latxa* sheep, and percussive non-Indo-European language. And from January to April, when the *sagardo* is at its puckering prime, cider houses across the region open their doors and welcome visitors with unlimited cider and Basque comfort food.

But this cider season, I wanted more than just a buzz: I wanted to understand just what went into preserving the age-old craft. With this in mind, I spent a day stomping around cider country with the three Gaincerain sisters, Zelaia's third-generation owners. The first stop? Their proprietary orchard, a shamrock-green tract of gnarled trees hemmed in by trickling brooks and mossy wooden fences. "The apples we grow here are revolting to eat out of hand," Maialen, the middle sister, said. "They're so sour and chalky that they make your eyes water." (In the apple industry, cider varieties are called "spitters" for a reason.)

The Gaincerains could have planted high-yielding French or [American cultivars](#), but instead took a gamble on less-predictable indigenous apples like *urtebitxiki*, *moko*, and *txalaka*. They saw cultural value in nurturing a bona fide Basque orchard that spoke to the region's heritage. "In this area, traditional dwellings had apple presses built directly into their central timbers," said Maialen. "That's how essential cider was to our ancestors' existence: Homes were literally structured around its production." Not all cider stayed home: In the 16th-century heyday of Basque whaling, sailors bound for exploration packed hogsheads of cider to ward off scurvy.

“  
Apples are about the only things that the Gaincerains' ancestors would recognize at Zelaia's state-of-the-art processing facility.

SHARE THIS QUOTE

Apples are about the only things that the Gaincerains' ancestors would recognize at Zelaia's state-of-the-art processing facility. "From late September to November, the apples arrive by the truckload," said Oihana, the oldest Gaincerain sister, noting that they process about 13 tons a day. The fresh apples tumble into a press, where they're crushed, so the bitter seeds don't infiltrate the juice. That juice is then poured into the massive *kupelas*, tuns the size of minivans, where it ferments under an enologist's supervision. Nothing—no additives, sweeteners, or carbonation—is added to the vats but time.

Courtesy Zelaia

Apples tumble into a press where they're crushed instead of ground, so the seeds don't infiltrate the juice.

By the time mid-January rolls around, the juice has converted its sugars into bone-dry alcohol, and the barrels are ready to be tapped. For the uninitiated, Basque-style ciders can be an acquired taste. They're funkier and more saline than *sidras* from neighboring Asturias, and far less fruity and fizzy than their British and French counterparts. But what Basque *sagardo* may lack in approachability it makes up for with a deep, savory earthiness that sings alongside [rich cheeses](#) and grilled meats.

Across the region, day in and day out, cider-house kitchens whip up a nearly identical menu of dishes for patrons: salt-cod omelettes; fried cod and roasted peppers; grilled bone-in steaks; and, for dessert, wedges of sheep's cheese served with quince preserves and walnuts. Subtract chairs and add endless cider, and the result hits the sweet spot between a buzzy cocktail party and a lavish banquet—in many ways, the ideal environment

for meeting someone new. “When you’re standing next to someone for four hours, you inevitably end up talking to them,” said Oihana. That’s the magic of the *sagardotegi*—the unexpected camaraderie.

And while the cider-house rituals—the homogenous menus, the tapping of the barrels, the obligatory cries of “*Txotx!*”—may seem like they’re steeped in centuries of history, unlike Basque cider itself, the *sagardotegi* as we know it is actually a recent invention. “Forty years ago, hardly anyone was eating and drinking in the cellars,” said Maialen. (*Txokos*, [male-only gastronomical societies](#) that would stop in to taste the wares and buy a few cases for their festivities, were the exception.) “As recently as 15 years ago, most diners brought their own steaks and bread; cider houses merely supplemented the potluck with omelettes, cheese, and booze.”

Courtesy Zelaia

Today, many cider houses stay open year-round.

---

Today, with tourism on the rise in the region thanks to Basque food proselytizers like [Anthony Bourdain](#) and David Chang, the *sagardotegi* dining model is once again in flux. Bucking tradition, many cider houses now stay open year-round and cater to corporate events, wedding parties, and massive tour groups. “The crowds and theme-park-style entertainment aren’t our style,” said Oihana. “But, the important thing is that people try *sagardo* while they’re here, so that they spread the word about it when they go back home.”

## How to Go

Most cider houses are located within thirty minutes of [San Sebastián](#) by car. From Madrid, [Barcelona](#), and other Spanish cities, rent a car or book a rideshare to San Sebastián via the [Blablacar app](#). Alternatively, train company [RENFE](#) and coach company [ALSA](#) offer routes to San Sebastián. Public transportation in the Basque Country is surprisingly efficient in rural areas; Zelaia is a 25-minute (A1 or A2), \$2 bus ride from San Sebastián’s Old Town. A taxi from San Sebastián to Zelaia costs between \$25 and \$50.

## When to Go

Traditional cider houses are open to the public from mid-January to the end of April. Most close on Sundays. For those traveling in cider’s off-season, the best year-round option is [Petrítegi](#) in Astigarraga, which stands out for its lively atmosphere and top-quality cider.